

Itamar Ben-Gvir's visit to a Jewish society at Yale exposed deep rifts between US Jews

Supporting racism while opposing antisemitism is a bad look

Senior Columnist [Rob Eshman](#) April 25, 2025



Israel's national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, flashes a peace sign at a crowd of protesters near Yale University's campus in New Haven, Connecticut, on April 23. Photo by Yakov Binyamin

Amid very public demonstrations against Israeli National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir when he came to speak at the invitation of a Jewish group near Yale University was a much quieter protest, among the members of the group that hosted him.

At least three people gave up their membership in the Shabtai Society, an elite group of current and former Yale students and professors, in response to Ben-Gvir's appearance. More registered their opposition to the invitation in emails, many of which were forwarded to me. And in their resistance to the extremist minister's visit is a powerful story about the widening rifts in the American Jewish community, over Israel and campus politics alike.

Since this is an opinion column, I'll jump in right now and say: Good for the people who decided that extending an invitation to Ben-Gvir was simply a step too far.

Ben-Gvir, who has called for the expulsion of Arab citizens of Israel, and has long been an open supporter of Jewish terrorists like the late Rabbi Meir Kahane and his acolyte Baruch Goldstein — who massacred 29 Muslim worshippers in Hebron in 1994 — boasts a conviction for racist incitement on his record. To the former Shabtai members who quit over his appearance, two of whom wished to remain anonymous, his appearance appeared sure to make things worse for Jews at Yale — while seeming to suggest Ben-Gvir's political beliefs are, somehow, within the scope of reasonableness.

“Feting such a figure at elite venues without space for countervoices is not promoting free speech, but rather legitimizing terrorism and state repression,” David Vincent Kimel, a now-former Shabtai Society member, wrote in his protest email to Rabbi Shmully Hecht, the rabbinical director of Shabtai, which he co-founded in 1996.

“I assume what this means is that we lose access to club events and the network and are on the record that Shabtai does not speak for us,” Kimel, an Israeli-born author who pursued a Ph.D. at Yale, wrote in an email to me. “It’s not the same organization that we joined if this is what it’s come to.” (Though not in any way affiliated with Yale, the Shabtai Society’s membership draws almost entirely from the university community.)

Ben-Gvir’s U.S. visit has been marked with controversy. Organizers canceled his appearance at an Orthodox Brooklyn synagogue to raise funds for Chabad in Hebron. Today, the Orthodox synagogue [Young Israel of Woodmere](#) announced his planned speech there would not go forward. His biggest boosters in the States, in short, appear to be the Shabtai Society.

But for Yale’s Jewish community, the tensions around Ben-Gvir’s appearance tapped into particularly pressing questions about how Jews are treated on campus.

“This event threatens to fuel extreme polarization on campus and cause reputational harm to all Jews associated with Shabtai,” Kimel wrote to Hecht before Ben-Gvir’s appearance. “There is also a real chance the press will cover it, and that association with Shabtai will be considered a link to extremism.”

He wasn’t wrong. Protesters — some of whom threw bottles — [confronted Ben-Gvir](#) when he arrived to speak at the Shabtai Society residence on Wednesday night in New Haven, Connecticut. (Ben-Gvir flashed a “V” for victory sign back at them.) Pro-Israel activists accused the protesters of antisemitism, and the Republican Rep. Kevin Kiley [called the protesters](#) “terrorists” and urged their expulsion.

It’s true that some protesters will show up no matter which Israeli is speaking — it’s Israel they oppose, and they’ll shout down even the most compromising two-stater.

But defending against that kind of mindless and often antisemitic protest is clear-cut. Defending Ben-Gvir is indefensible.

And it's hypocritical to express horror while claiming that anti-Israel protesters cross the line into antisemitism, when Ben-Gvir's own actions and rhetoric proudly cross the line to anti-Arab racism.

The Shabtai members who objected to Ben-Gvir's appearance understand that dynamic well, and worried that Ben-Gvir's appearance might fuel latent perceptions that Jews, amid President Donald Trump's controversial campaign against campus antisemitism, are receiving special treatment.

Kimel and others pointed out that, after the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas terror attack on Israel, Hecht circulated [a petition](#) calling for Jews he accused of being traitors to Israel to be excommunicated. These included *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman; Jeremy Ben-Ami, the founder of the liberal Zionist lobbying group J Street; and the author Peter Beinart.

"No matter what you think about the individuals on this list," Kimel wrote, "it is plainly inconsistent to call for the dismissal of these Jews on the basis of their beliefs while hosting Ben-Gvir in the spirit of 'free speech.'"

The dissent within the ranks of the rarified Shabtai echoes the larger divisions wracking American Jewry. Some Jewish groups and movements have loudly opposed Ben-Gvir's U.S. visit, and some have supported it, either outwardly or by their silence.

Kimel's letter sparked a flurry of back-and-forth emails between members of the organization, with those defending the group saying it was a platform for all opinions across the spectrum.

"In my experience at Shabtai," wrote one member, "I was exposed to many ideas that I found wrong, disagreeable, and sometimes even offensive. I never felt afraid to speak out, even when in the minority or alone, because it was absolutely understood as table-stakes that Shabtai is a place where diverse perspectives and opinions are not only welcome but also encouraged."

But as Kimel wrote in his email to me, the choice to invite Ben-Gvir — who will also speak at an invitation-only event, also hosted by the Shabtai Society, on Monday — in the first place has likely caused needless division and reputational damage. There are disagreeable and offensive ideas — and then there are the kinds of overt calls for violence and bigotry on which Ben-Gvir has built his ill-gotten public profile.

"In Israel itself we know you can support Israel's right to exist," wrote Kimel, "and still be against the likes of Ben-Gvir."

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